

Column by Rep. Steve Doyle
March 4, 2013

Recently, the Governor presented his 2013-2015 biennial budget to a joint session of the Legislature. While a lot of politicians only focus on the partisan aspects of the budget, I'd like to focus on the facts of what this budget proposal really means for the people of western Wisconsin.

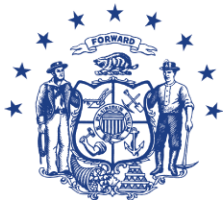
On the positive side the Governor proposes to add \$5.3 million to improve the long-term solvency of the Veterans Trust Fund, which is used for nearly all of the State's veterans' programs. I support this priority.

Tourism is a \$16 billion business in Wisconsin, but competition with other states is fierce. The Governor is proposing to increase the tourism budget by \$1.6 million, a good investment considering that every dollar of advertising produces six dollars of revenue and 1 in every 13 jobs in our state is sustained by tourism activity. I also support this increase.

The most controversial issue of the budget has been the proposal to increase taxpayer funding for private voucher schools by \$94 million, a 29% increase, compared with an increase of less than inflation for our public schools. The proposal would also increase per-pupil taxpayer funding for these private schools. This means that the tax dollars will go to private schools that are not accountable to taxpayers. At the same time, the budget freezes all spending for public school districts.

This increase in voucher funding could not have come at a worse time for our local schools. Our districts are already struggling to make ends meet with the funding they currently receive from the state. In the Onalaska School District, the average student receives \$4,708 in state aid which is \$1,734 less than the amount received by the average voucher student. In West Salem, students receive \$236 less than their voucher school counterparts. The math here is not that complicated. We simply cannot keep decreasing the funds for public schools and expect them to be able to compete with these taxpayer-supported voucher schools. It is especially unfair when one considers that private voucher schools are not bound by the same rules and standards as our public schools.

While vouchers will continue to take center stage in the budget debate for some time, there are many other important issues with this proposal. For example, funding for our state's technical college system in this budget would be set at \$5 million per year, a far cry from the funds needed to replace the \$72 million cut from last year's budget. In a time when people are so desperate for work that they are returning to school for training, we are short-changing them of the quality education they need and deserve. Just as alarming are the planned reductions to the Earned Income Tax Credit and the homestead credit, which are designed to help those who desperately need our help.



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Unfortunately, the Governor is not proposing a balanced budget, a serious concern for me. Using generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP), Wisconsin will have a \$2 billion structural deficit at the end of Fiscal Year 2012-2013 and a \$2.644 billion structural deficit by the end of 2014-2015. At a time when we are encouraging people and local governments to spend within their means, the least we can do in State government is to follow that same advice. I can't support a budget that spends more than we expect to take in.

At the same time, the budget includes several provisions which have the potential to help Wisconsin get on the right track. A proposed \$181.35 million increase in funding to the UW-system could mean an end to the years of frozen salaries and bring much-needed funding stability to the program.

In the coming weeks, my colleagues and I will be closely reviewing the Governor's proposal in order to better understand the exact implications of the plan. The introduction of the Governor's proposal is just the first step in the budget process. The next step will be when the Joint Finance Committee takes up the proposal and debates the merits of each appropriation. I encourage you to continue to contact me on budgetary issues of concern to you throughout the entire process.

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